# Is the Pope a communist?

Ed Stourton

The two Popes also had a very different understanding of Liberation Theology, the controversial movement based on the conviction that the gospels enjoin the Church to put the poor first, which preoccupied and divided Latin America's Catholics for much of the 1960s, 70s, and 80s. John Paul believed it had tempted some priests and bishops into quasi-Marxist and even violent ideology, and as Pope he cracked down on some Liberation Theologians. Jorge Bergoglio rejected Marxism - although he cheerfully accepts that he has many Marxist friends - but accepted many of Liberation Theology's principles, espousing what Austen Ivereigh calls "a nationalist version" of the movement, or a so-called "Theology of the People".

Nonetheless, the economic writings of both John Paul and Francis also reflect the same intellectual tradition - one known as Catholic Social Teaching. It was originally articulated in an 1891 papal document called *Rerum Novarum*, in which Pope Leo XIII addressed what he called the "spirit of revolutionary change" then sweeping Europe.

Some of it is very clearly designed to be a rebuttal of the communist ideas that were part of that change, but it is also a critique of aspects of capitalism. So it is an unfamiliar mix that does not fit neatly into the left-right divide that dominated the politics of the following century.

Prof Maurice Glasman, a British economist who used to be a close confidant of Ed Miliband, studied Catholic social teaching for his PhD. He was attracted by the way it rejects the conventional ideologies of both left and right.

"It really opposes this idea that there is just the state or the market," he says. "It believes in activating society - what it calls solidarity - so that it can resist the domination by the rich of the poor, but through trade unions and vocational associations and what's called subsidiarity, which is the decentralisation of power." Glasman says it is opposed to communism because it "upholds private property" and is "anti-collectivist".

Glasman has a vivid memory of being attacked by an American economist after giving a paper at a recent Vatican conference on Catholic social teaching. "You

know there's a word for what you're saying, Baron Lord Professor or whatever you are," the challenge began. "Yeah, it's called Communism. You're trying to interfere with the prerogatives of management, you're trying to interfere with capital, and you're trying to interfere with prices. And that's been tried - and that's the Soviet Union."

During the subsequent discussion Glasman was delighted to find himself supported by both the Pope and the Archbishop of Munich, the appropriately named Cardinal Marx.

Francis' interpretation of Catholic social teaching certainly sounds more radical than that of his predecessors. In Argentina he insisted that his priests should see the world through the eyes of the poor, by living among them, and he brought that approach with him to Rome. Evangelii Gaudium - the document which got Rush Limbaugh so worked up - argues that inequality creates "a state of social sin that cries to Heaven". Pope Frances has also said that unemployment is "the result of a worldwide choice, of an economic system that led to this tragedy, an economic system that has at its centre a false God, a false God called money".

Philip Booth, a Catholic economist who works at the London free-market think tank the Institute for Economic Affairs, suggests Francis's rhetoric is close to that of the Guardian columnist Polly Toynbee and the left-wing French economist Thomas Piketty, whose book on inequality became an international bestseller last year.

He describes Francis as a "corporatist" who believes in a big state, and argues the Pope's statements are "dangerous" because they could "lead us to bad policy".

The answer to the question posed in the title of this piece is "No". There is lots for those on the left to admire in Pope Francis, and lots for those on the right to be scandalised by, but he is not a communist.

He does, however, seem to enjoy provoking people. He will soon publish an encyclical expected to deal with climate change, and a priest who has been briefed on the contents told us "If some people think that he's a Marxist (now), wait and see what he says on the environment!"

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